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ABSTRACT

The general impression conveyed by the literature in the social psychology of aging is that various dimensions of the self, including self-esteem, are relatively fixed and stable by the later stages of the life cycle. Existing research implies that the self-esteem of older persons is higher than that of younger persons, and also more stable or resistant to external influences. This study examined the influence of social, familial, and eonomic factors on the self-esteem of older persons. Subjects (N=4,122) were adults age 55 and over who agreed to receive mailed questionnaires when contacted randomly by telephone. Self-esteem, marital satisfaction, relationship with neighbors, education, health, family income, and employment were assessed. Results showed that the self-esteem of older persons was positively affected by education, income (for males), health, and frequency of interaction with friends. Marital satisfaction had a positive effect on self-esteem second in magnitude only to the effect of health; for males, the effect of marital satisfaction was stronger for the retired than for the employed. No other family related variables had significant effects on self-esteem except that never-married women had slightly lower self-esteem than others. Results suggest that self-esteem is still responsive to some social factors among older persons, and therefore should not be ignored in research or theory on the psychological well-being of the elderly. (ABL)

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FAMILY RELATIONS AND THE SELF-ESTEEM OF OLDER PERSONS

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FAMILY RELATIONS AND THE SELF-ESTEEM OF OLDER PERSONS

Introduction

The general impression conveyed by the literature in the social psychology of aging is that various dimensions of the self, including self-esteem, are relatively fixed and stable by the later stages of the life cycle. Atchley (1988: 105), for example, argues that:

> . . . although the self may be relatively open to outside influence during the process of self-discovery, it tends to be relatively closed to it during the process of self-maintenance.

Self-maintenance, by definition, is equated with the later stages of life in this argument, whereas self-discovery is regarded as a developmental task appropriate to earlier stages.

Bengtson, Reedy, and Gordon (1985), based on a review of relevant research, conclude that there is a positive relationship between age and self-esteem (see also Turner, 1979). This may be a function, in part, of increasing stability of the self-concept and increasing self-acceptance, implying greater imperviousness to negative reflected appraisals (Atchley, 1988).

Collectively, then, existing research implies that the self-esteem of older persons is higher than that of younger persons,

and also more stable or resistant to external influences. This has important consequences, because a secure and stable self-concept apparently serves as a buffer against the impact of stressful events. Shamir (1986) found that self-esteem was not affected by either unemployment or re-employment among a sample of Israeli males, although unemployment had stronger effects on depression, anxiety, and morale for those with low self-esteem. Johnson, Lund, and Dimond (1986) reported that self-esteem tends to be stable for at least a year following widowhood, although those with higher self-esteem cope better with the stress of widowhood. Johnson et al., however, did not measure self-esteem prior to widowhood.

While these studies suggest that self-esteem is less volatile among adults, especially the elderly, than among children or adolescents (see Felson and Reed, 1986; Gecas and Schwalbe, 1986; Hoelter and Harper, 1987), they do not imply that self-esteem is invariant beyond any given age. Among adults, self-esteem has been found to be related to properties of both marital (Brodbar-Nemzer, 1986; Pittman, Price-Bonham, and McKenry, 1983) and parent-child relationships (Demo, Small, and Savin-Williams, 1987).

Most studies of psychological well-being among the elderly have employed constructs such as morale or life satisfaction as dependent variables. Self-esteem has been examined very rarely, even though it appears to be a component of a general well-being factor (Lawton, Kleban, and diCarlo, 1984). However, self-esteem

is frequently employed as an unmeasured construct in theoretical interpretations of relations between social and other subjective phenomena. Lemon, Bengtson, and Peterson (1972), in their original formalization of activity theory, posit that social interaction positively affects life satisfaction because it allows the opportunity for selective, and therefore supportive, reflected appraisals from significant others (see also Longino and Kart, 1982). According to Lemon et al. (1972: 515):

> Activity provides various role supports necessary for reaffirming one's self-concept. The more intimate and the more frequent the activity, the more reinforcing and the more specific will be the role supports. Role supports are necessary for the maintenance of a positive self-concept which in turn is associated with high life satisfaction.

In a similar vein, Lee and Ishii-Kuntz (1987) suggest that friendship interaction affects morale because friendship is premised on mutual choice, and being chosen as a friend reflects an appraisal by another that one has admirable or attractive qualities. Interaction with kin has no such effect because kinship is bounded by norms of obligation, minimizing the voluntary element of interaction (see also Lee and Ellithorpe, 1982; Lee and Ihinger-Tallman, 1980). Self-esteem is an implicit intervening variable in this theory.

There are reasons, then, to expect variation in self-esteem

among the elderly, and to expect this variation to be systematically associated with at least some dimensions of social integration. In this study of older persons, we hypothesize that self-esteem is influenced by social, familial, and economic factors. We expect self-esteem to be higher among the married than the unmarried, because of the psychological benefits deriving from an intimate association and because marriage is a valued status in our culture. For similar reasons, self-esteem should be higher among parents than those without children. However, we anticipate no effect of frequency of interaction with adult children on the self-esteem of their parents, for reasons mentioned above. Frequency of interaction with friends and with neighbors, on the other hand, are expected to have positive effects because of the mutual choice factor noted above. Participation in voluntary associations is also hypothesized to affect self-esteem positively.

Another potentially critical element of family relations involves marital satisfaction. A happy marriage is an important life goal for Americans and is highly valued in our culture. Previous studies have shown that marital satisfaction is positively related to morale (Lee, 1978) and negatively related to anomie (Lee, 1974). Those who are unhappily married, particularly in later life, have failed to achieve this goal, and are also at risk of exposure to negative appraisals from their spouses emanating from tensions and conflicts in the relationship. We therefore hypothesize a positive relationship

between marital satisfaction and self-esteem (see also Pittman et al., 1983).

We also anticipate that education and income have positive effects on self-esteem. Atchley (1988: 107) argues that poor health is also a major cause of low self-esteem among older persons, perhaps because it raises the specter of dependency; accordingly, we hypothesize a positive effect of health on self-esteem. In addition, although retirement has not been found to have major effects on the psychological well-being of older persons (George, Fillenbaum, and Palmore, 1984; Palmore, Fillenbaum, and George, 1984; Palmore et al., 1985), there is some reason to expect an interaction effect between employment status and social variables. Those who are employed may be less affected by relations with spouses, children, friends, and neighbors because they have less time for social activities, and evaluate themselves more in terms of occupation-related factors. Social relations may become more critical for self-esteem following retirement, and may also play a more prominent role among those (primarily women) who have not been regularly employed.

Finally, because of the differential socialization of men and women in our society, we hypothesize that the effects of familial and other social factors on self-esteem are stronger for women, while the effects of employment status, education, and income are stronger for men. Success in social relations, especially marital and familial, is more heavily emphasized for

females in our culture, while men are conditioned to evaluate themselves more in terms of their success in the economic and occupational world.

Methods

Sampling

The data for this analysis were obtained from residents of Washington state in the spring of 1980 by mailed questionnaire. The minimum age of eligibility for inclusion in the study was 55. Eligible respondents were identified by a telephone survey employing random digit dialing. Of a total of 15,166 households contacted by telephone, 4,272 (28.2%) contained at least one member aged 55 or over. Members of 3,481 households (81.5%), containing a total of 4,922 potential respondents, agreed to receive mailed questionnaires. Following Dillman's (1978) "Total Design Method," completed questionnaires were received from 4,122 individuals (83.8%).

An accurate calculation of the response rate, however, must take the refusal to participate at the telephone contact stage into account. Assuming that the mean number of eligible respondents per household is the same for those who refused to participate as for those who agreed (1.414), we estimate that households containing 6,041 eligible respondents were contacted by telephone. The receipt of 4,122 completed questionnaires reflects an estimated overall response rate of 68.2%.

This analysis is restricted to respondents who answered all

pertinent items, leaving 1,395 men and 1,609 women. All analyses are conducted separately by gender, to allow for the possibility of different patterns among men and women as hypothesized above.

Measurement

The dependent variable, self-esteem, is measured by the 10-item Rosenberg (1965, 1979) scale. While this scale was originally designed for adolescents, the items are in fact non-age-specific, and the scale has proven to be reasonably reliable and valid for samples of varying ages in many previous studies. Lawton et al. (1984) found that items from this scale loaded on two distinct factors for a sample of elderly persons; these factors, however, were sufficiently similar in their behavior to permit combining them, and the combination proved to be fairly reliable (alpha = .71; test-retest r = .79). For this sample the scale yields reliability estimates (alpha) of .84 for both males and females, and no deletions of items would result in improvements in reliability. The items were presented in a Likert-type format, with response categories ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree); the five items phrased in the negative direction were reversed, so high scores indicate high self-esteem. Scale means are 30.72 for males and 30.77 for females.

Marital satisfaction (MARSAT) is measured by six evaluative items. Three items ask for degree of satisfaction with selected aspects of the marital relationship (love and affection,

companionship, and understanding), and a fourth requests a similar evaluation of the overall relationship. Respondents were also asked whether or not they would marry the same person again, and whether the marriage is more or less happy now than in the first few years of the marriage. The scale is highly reliable (alpha = .91 for men and .92 for women). Unmarried respondents were assigned the mean scale values for their gender (24.84 for men, 24.04 for women).

Three dummy variables are employed for marital status: SINGLE, DIVORCE, and WIDOW; married is the suppressed category. This technique causes the effect of MARSAT to apply only to married respondents (Cohen and Cohen, 1975).

The remaining two family-related variables include a dummy variable for having living children (KIDS), and a three-item measure of frequency of interaction with non-coresident children and grandchildren (FAMILY). Respondents without children or grandchildren are assigned scores of zero on the appropriate components of the latter measure.

Three measures are employed for non-family social participation. GROUPS is simply the number of voluntary associations to which the respondent belongs. NABORS is a four-item index of acquaintance, frequency of interaction, and exchange of favors and services with neighbors. FRIENDS is a three-item index including number of close friends (in five categories), and frequency of visits with friends in the respondents' and the friends' homes.

Age and education are measured in years. Family income is assessed on a twelve-point continuum ranging from $2,000 per year or less to $50,000 or more. Health is indexed by the sum of two items, one involving the respondent's evaluation of his/her health on a continuum ranging from "excellent" to "very poor," and the other asking whether the respondent's health prevents him/her from doing things he/she wants or needs to do.

Finally, employment status is measured in slightly different ways for men and women. For men, a dummy variable (RETIRE) is assigned a value of 1 if the respondent is retired and 0 if employed; those who identified themselves as homemakers or unemployed are excluded because there are too few for meaningful analysis. For women, two dummy variables were created, one for the retired (RETIRE = 1) and one for homemakers (HOME =1); the employed, again, are the suppressed category.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Means and standard deviations for all variables are shown in Table 1, separately for males and females.

Results

The regression analyses of self-esteem for males and females are shown in Table 2. In each panel, the first column shows the bivariate correlation between each variable and self-esteem. The remaining three columns show, consecutively, the unstandardized

regression coefficient (b), its standard error (SE), and the standardized regression coefficient (Beta).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The model accounts for slightly more of the variation in self-esteem for men (R^2 = .247) than for women (R^2 = .193), but the patterns of significant correlations and effects are similar in most respects. Age is negatively correlated with self-esteem, but with the other variables controlled the effect is nonsignificant. Health has the strongest effect on self-esteem for both sexes. The effect of education is positive and significant for both sexes, while that of income is significant only for men.

Being retired is negatively related to self esteem for both men and women, although the correlation is notably stronger for men, as hypothesized. Interestingly, however, the effect disappears for men in the multivariate analysis but strengthens, and remains significant, for women. Being a homemaker also has a significant negative effect on self-esteem for women which is not apparent from the bivariate correlation. Contrary to expectations, it appears that not being employed, for whatever reason, has a negative effect on the self-esteem of older women but not older men.

The non-family social participation variables are each positively correlated with self-esteem, but only interaction with

friends has a significant effect for both sexes. Voluntary association participation has a significant effect for women, but not men.

Having children and frequency of interacting with them are unrelated to self-esteem. Somewhat surprisingly, the effects of marital status are nonsignificant and trivial with one exception: never-married women have slightly lower levels of self-esteem than married women. The divorced and widowed (as well as single men) do not differ from their married counterparts.

Marital satisfaction is positively and significantly related to self-esteem for both sexes. The relationship is only moderately diminished when other variables are controlled, and is of approximately equal strength for men and women ($\underline{b}$ = .150 and .139, respectively). Relative to other predictors, its effect is second only to health. Thus the self-evaluated success of one's marriage does influence self-esteem, but the other family variables examined here have minimal or nonexistent effects.

We had hypothesized a series of interaction effects involving social factors and employment status, such that social and familial relations were expected to have stronger effects on the self-esteem of those who are retired or otherwise not employed (i.e., homemakers) than for the employed. Interaction terms were created by multiplying employment status (dichotomized into employed vs. others for both sexes) by interaction with neighbors, friends, and family, voluntary association participation, parental status, marital status, and marital

satisfaction. These terms were then added to the model reported in Table 2 (results not shown).

None of the interaction terms approached statistical significance for women, indicating that the effects of the social and familial variables are roughly similar regardless of employment status. For men, however, two of the interaction terms attained significance at the .05 level: employment status by parental status, and employment status by marital satisfaction. To examine these effects, the equation estimated in Table 2 was re-estimated (minus RETIRE, of course) for employed and retired men separately. The results are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The significant interaction terms involved parental status (KIDS) and marital satisfaction (MARSAT). As shown in Table 3, the effect of KIDS on self-esteem is negative for employed men and positive for retired men. However, although these coefficients differ significantly from one another, neither one is significantly different from zero. In any event, the coefficients are trivial in terms of magnitude.

The effect of marital satisfaction on self-esteem is significantly stronger for retired than employed men, although it is significant for both categories. This conforms to our hypothesis. From these data, of course, we cannot ascertain

whether the importance of marital satisfaction actually increases following retirement or whether marital satisfaction has always been more important for the self-esteem of those who are currently retired. However, we see no logical or empirical reason to expect a cohort effect here. Marital interaction constitutes a larger proportion of total interaction for retired than employed men, so the quality of the relationship with the spouse may indeed be more critical after retirement than before.

Checks for interactions between employment status and marital status yielded no significant interaction effects. Marital status clearly is not critical to the self-esteem of older persons, regardless of gender or retirement status, except for the small negative effect of being never-married for women noted above. The same is true for frequency of interaction with children and grandchildren. Interaction with friends, on the other hand, has a significant positive effect on self-esteem for both sexes, regardless of employment status.

Discussion

As hypothesized, the self-esteem of older persons is positively affected by education, income (for males), health, and frequency of interaction with friends. Marital satisfaction has a positive effect on self-esteem second in magnitude only to the effect of health; for males, the effect of marital satisfaction is stronger for the retired than the employed, as expected. No other family-related variables, including marital status, have

significant effects on self-esteem except that never-married women have slightly lower self-esteem than others.

Perhaps it is not surprising that older women who have never married have lower self-esteem than those who have, given the emphasis on the value of marriage for women in our culture. However, it is not simply the absence of a spouse that causes lower self-esteem for the never-married, since divorced and widowed women do not differ from their married counterparts. It may be that, for some women at least, marriage is interpretable as an important life goal, which those who have never married have not achieved. Those who marry have achieved the goal, even if they subsequently lose their spouses through either divorce or death.

We had hypothesized that self-esteem would be more strongly affected by economic and occupational factors for men, and by social and familial factors for women. The data provide relatively little support for this expectation, however, beyond the negative effect of being single that appears only for women. There is a small positive effect of income on self-esteem for men but not women, and a small positive effect of voluntary association participation for women but not men. On the other hand, the effects of marital satisfaction and interaction with friends are positive and roughly equal for both sexes (although the effect of marital satisfaction is stronger for retired than employed men, as hypothesized), and parental status, frequency of interaction with adult children and grandchildren, and frequency

of interaction with neighbors have no effects for either sex.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these findings involves the negative effects of nonemployment for women. With other factors controlled, those who identify themselves as either retired or homemakers have lower levels of self-esteem than the employed. Although the effects are small, they directly contradict our hypothesis that employment-related factors should have stronger effects for men.

In the absence of longitudinal data, we can only speculate about the causal processes involved. It is tempting to posit a selection effect here, such that women with higher levels of self-esteem are more likely to choose to work, but this cannot account for the negative effect of being retired. It may be more reasonable to interpret this as a positive effect of employment itself on the self-esteem of older women, stemming from interactions with others on the job and from occupational accomplishments, but one would expect some carryover of these benefits of employment beyond the point of retirement. One would also expect similar processes to be operative among men, perhaps even more strongly, but this is not the case according to these data. Longitudinal analyses are clearly required for the resolution of this dilemma.

Conclusions

Although this study in no way disputes the argument in the literature that self-esteem is relatively high and stable among

older persons, it has demonstrated that certain social and familial factors covary with self-esteem. Friendship interaction positively influences the self-esteem of older men and women, while interaction with close kin (other than the spouse) does not; both of these patterns conform to existing theory.

The self-rated quality of one's marriage also exerts an influence on self-esteem, although the loss of the spouse through either divorce or death has no effect. The effect of marital satisfaction may be due to the interactional properties of the relationship, or to the personal gratification derived from accomplishing the culturally-endorsed goal of a happy marriage (Lee, 1974). Marital satisfaction is more important to retired than employed men, as hypothesized, but in general is no less important to men than to women.

These results suggest that self-esteem is still responsive to some social factors among older persons, and therefore should not be ignored in research or theory on the psychological well-being of the elderly. Since previous studies (Johnson et al., 1986; Shamir, 1986) have shown that self-esteem has important consequences for adjustment to potentially stressful events among adults, further inquiry into the antecedents of self-esteem among older persons is clearly warranted.

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TABLE 1: Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables, by Gender

	Males		Females	
Variable	$\bar{X}$	s	$\bar{X}$	s
AGE	65.05	7.06	65.28	7.44
EDUC	12.35	2.90	12.42	2.51
INCOME	6.64	2.90	5.52	2.86
HEALTH	6.64	1.74	6.76	1.64
RETIRE	0.56	0.50	0.41	0.49
HOME	—	—	0.34	0.47
GROUPS	2.30	2.25	1.93	1.91
NABORS	13.26	3.14	13.41	3.22
FRIENDS	8.50	2.33	8.91	2.29
KIDS	0.89	0.31	0.88	0.33
FAMILY	9.05	4.87	9.68	5.06
SINGLE	0.03	0.17	0.03	0.18
DIVORCE	0.04	0.19	0.08	0.26
WIDOW	0.05	0.22	0.24	0.43
MARSAT	24.84	4.31	24.04	3.95
ESTEEM	30.72	3.35	30.77	3.37
N	1,395		1,609	

TABLE 2: Regression Analysis of Self-Esteem, by Gender

	Males				Females			
Variable	r	b	SE	Beta	r	b	SE	Beta
AGE	-.131*	-.021	.014	-.043	-.105*	-.006	.013	-.014
EDUC	.190*	.087*	.031	.076	.161*	.083*	.034	.062
INCOME	.234*	.087*	.036	.075	.163*	.040	.034	.034
HEALTH	.406*	.614*	.048	.319	.337*	.551*	.049	.269
RETIRE	-.179*	-.260	.202	-.039	-.087*	-.824*	.228	-.120
HOME	—	—	—	—	-.056	-.900*	.213	-.127
GROUPS	.165*	.058	.038	.039	.136*	.110*	.043	.063
NABORS	.115*	.011	.028	.010	.114*	.042	.027	.040
FRIENDS	.174*	.152*	.038	.106	.139*	.142*	.038	.097
KIDS	.021	-.006	.357	-.001	.041	-.079	.353	-.008
FAMILY	.030	.002	.021	.002	.049	.015	.021	.022
SINGLE	-.021	-.360	.536	-.018	-.063*	-1.493*	.491	-.081
DIVORCE	-.032	-.047	.412	-.003	.015	.317	.314	.025
WIDOW	-.022	.415	.366	.027	-.041	.028	.213	.004
MARSAT	.243*	.150*	.019	.194	.213*	.139*	.020	.164
R^2		.247				.193		
N		1,395				1,609		

* $p \leq .01$

TABLE 3: Regression Analysis of Self-Esteem for Males, by Employment Status

	Employed			Retired		
Variable	b	SE	Beta	b	SE	Beta
AGE	-.027	.025	-.041	-.023	.017	-.046
EDUC	.106*	.048	.091	.081*	.041*	.069
INCOME	.092*	.051	.079	.083*	.050	.059
HEALTH	.487**	.079	.241	.682**	.062	.357
GROUPS	.082*	.050	.067	.023	.059	.013
NABORS	.021	.040	.021	-.003	.039	-.003
FRIENDS	.144**	.056	.107	.162**	.053	.110
KIDS	-.855	.617	-.070	.447	.462	.045
FAMILY	.025	.029	.039	-.022	.032	-.031
SINGLE	-.158	.991	-.007	-.523	.651	-.027
DIVORCE	.196	.649	.011	-.202	.5384	-.011
WIDOW	.782	.797	.037	.319	.423	.024
MARSAT	.094**	.027	.135	.200**	.026	.244
R^2		.171			.269	
N		614			781	

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$